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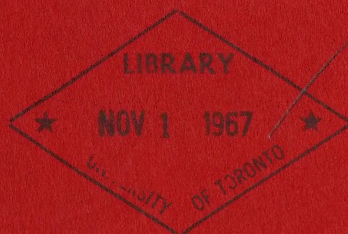
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FACE
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**Community Development In Canada:
Some Emerging Issues and Problems**

B.W. Lappin



MP - 24

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN CANADA:
SOME EMERGING ISSUES AND PROBLEMS

B. W. Lappin

I

Reduced to its simplest terms, community development seeks to generate initiative for economic and social productivity. Now, we in the Western world are old hands at instilling initiative within the individual. Our efforts in this respect go back to the time when we began applying self-help imperatives rooted in the Protestant ethic to the dictates of the Industrial Revolution. Thus over a span of more than two centuries we have learned to develop highly motivated, self-disciplined populations who not only produce a vast abundance of material goods and services but through mass media have been also conditioned to expend, with equal vigour and obedience, their incomes in consuming these goods and services.

To maintain the incentives indispensable to the production-consumption cycle, we have traditionally depended on free enterprise. Where free enterprise has failed to stoke the fires of competition, initiative, and independence, on which self-motivation feeds in our society, we have developed a battery of counselling and social services to activate these qualities in the individual who has fallen by the wayside and thus to make him, as we say, productive again. That is perhaps why the genius of social work on this continent, as Granger points out, lies in the remedial phase¹ -- restoration and rehabilitation. And so that the individual will remain the primary target of our self-help programmes we have at the community level made available to him resources concerned largely with co-ordination and federation to reduce duplication and close gaps in the constellation of counselling facilities we have put at his disposal.

¹Lester B. Granger, "The Nature and Role of Community Development", paper delivered at the Canadian Conference on Social Work, Winnipeg, 1962 (pamphlet).

Whereas in Canada, productivity and the high living standard it produces have been left largely to individual initiative, in the developing countries, where so much of our knowledge and understanding of community development is coming from, the basic unit of productivity is the community. This is one fundamental fact about which we must be clear as we seek to bring to our individuated society a method being applied in various Asian, African, and South American lands. Those societies do not attach the same value to individual initiative that prevails in a country such as Canada.

It is not enough to adapt to our own needs the skills of the village level generalist working so effectively in the developing countries. Community development in Canada must also have a clearly communicable rationale based on the unique conditions prevailing in this country. After a long uphill struggle our society has learned to provide assistance to the individual in need. At first we proffered such help grudgingly and disparagingly to the point of cruelty; we called it relief. In recent decades we have achieved, despite still powerful and persistent opposition, the provision of such assistance in keeping with the dictates of health and decency. With the introduction of community development we are expanding the concept of self-help, from individual and family to the much larger unit of community. The sponsors of this new approach, whether they be public or voluntary, must, by virtue of accountability to the public, inform it why such a development is unavoidable, and why we can no longer rely solely on individual initiative to carry the war on poverty. Just as we have learned to define health and decency in relation to the family, we will have to find the means for identifying health and decency at the level of community. And just as the raising of standards in assistance to individual and family entailed a long, stubborn struggle, so must we gird ourselves to face entrenched obstinacy in relation to help needed at the community level.

To be specific, suppose health and decency, for the sake of argument, hinge on the introduction of a new industry in a certain depressed region. Will industry take kindly to the idea of tax money being applied to develop potential competitors even where market research may have established that it is unprofitable for private enterprise to go into these depressed areas? To be sure, such support has been evinced in certain

isolated instances and public funds have been provided to get industry underway in a few economically underdeveloped pockets. However, these pilot projects may in time serve to pinpoint the need for what may virtually amount to ongoing economic aid to sustain certain areas of chronic poverty in Canada. Thus these experimental ventures prompt an important question: Is private enterprise in this country ready to accommodate in its midst what may amount to a socialized approach to economic productivity?

The struggle to institute community development may not be easier or shorter than was the period of trial and tribulation which had to be endured in bringing previous aspects of our social welfare programme up to their present level. At the risk of overstatement, this point, nevertheless, deserves emphasis, because community development is all too often perceived as an action proceeding on a horizontal plane in which the local level practitioner helps the community to discover or rediscover its initiative and capacity for taking its destiny into its own hands while he brings to bear a variety of specialists in agriculture, health, education, industry, and the like, to enhance the process of development. But once government steps into the picture, community development moves also on a vertical axis linking the tiny rural community in need to federal or provincial capitals and with workers carrying different responsibilities stationed, so to speak, at various critical points of this continuum. This calls for comprehensive responsibility in resources and services. Such responsibility is increasingly being acknowledged in the developing countries, as is implicit in the definition advanced by the United Nations Secretariat in a recent paper entitled "Community Development in relation to National Planning":

In very simple terms, community development starts out from the premise that a faster rate of development and more assurance of continuity would be possible if the vast underutilized human resources of local communities could be brought into more effective play. It further assumes that mere physical participation by the people is not enough, however well organized by their leaders, but rather what is needed is wider participation by the people in arriving at decisions that affect their lives, and their intelligent and responsible cooperation with the Government in the planning and carrying out of programmes and activities for the common good. Community

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development sets out with the objective of bringing about an increased capacity on the part of people, to think, plan, organize and act on their own behalves with increasing consciousness of their role in the network of economic and social relationships which constitute national life.²

II

Community development in Canada does not merely require the application and adaptation of a tool developed elsewhere; it entails a formidable indigenous task whereby our society will have to modify its perception of self-determination from a purely individualistic to a community-based phenomenon. But there is another equally significant problem which we must come to grips with in our deployment of community development in the current war on poverty. In the developing countries poverty, misery, want, constitute the general rule and the standing condition embracing the vast majority of the people living in the villages and urban communities. The locality which embarks on a community development project is not only striving to improve its own lot but is engaging in a venture which at the same time is breaking new frontiers for the society as a whole. Thus community development may be accompanied by a zeal and a sense of mission which can lend solidarity, high morale, and prestige to those engaged in development projects. This is a fact that the developing countries are becoming increasingly aware of, as the following statement in the paper cited previously would indicate:

If villagers could see their goals as part of a national goal...and their efforts as part of a national effort, their own self-esteem would be enhanced, their horizons enlarged and a new dimension added to their motivation. It is possible for village effort as a whole to be heightened if people have had a chance to see themselves in these larger terms.³

²United Nations Secretariat, "Community Development in relation to National Planning", ACC/WGRCD/Working Paper No. 4, United Nations, 22 June, 1965 (mimeographed), pp. 2-3.

³Ibid., p.29.

Thus each individual sees himself engaged in a task larger than his own or even that of his immediate community. Far from separating the members of such a community from society as a whole, their involvement in planned development may very well transform them into the community's standard bearers.

This is a crucial morale-endowing aspect which may not be so easily achieved on the Canadian scene, for in Canada poverty and its attendant evils are viewed as a disease. To be sure it is a very extensive affliction, embracing some 4,000,000 Canadians, or about 20 per cent of the population, but like any other illness, major or otherwise, poverty in our society has lost the age-old connotation of grace which once accompanied the state of want. This has been an ennobling characteristic throughout time, and poverty, or the threat of it, became the motivating force underlying many ideologies and movements which until as late as the Great Depression provided the sinews to the disadvantaged whereby they hammered down barriers standing in their way to a productive life. Through the "insurance revolution" in Britain early in the century, through the New Deal in the United States during the '30's, and through similar though less dramatic battles in Canada, the poor made inroads into the middle class and gained access to the labour market. In retrospect, this was not interaction on the basis of sufferance; the gains were made through power which those in want accumulated through galvanizing ideologies that produced immense organizational strength.

With our society now extending its benefits and opportunities to some 80 per cent of the population, we have turned from the ideological movements to large bureaucratic structures, mainly government sponsored, to deal with the poor who remain separated from these benefits. The ideologies have fallen into disuse because in a sense they have done their job, they have delivered entree to the large masses who were formerly dispossessed and who now, for nearly three decades, are part and parcel of the "establishment", to use the popular term. This in effect leaves the current poor without mass-based organizations of their own. Consequently they are without the sinews that, for example, the poor of the '30's possessed by virtue of their organized strength. The situation poses a threat to the present class of poor, a threat which, ironically is exacerbated by the very bureaucracies established to wage the war on poverty. As Cloward and Piven point out:

The public bureaucracies seek ... to prevent the emergence of organized influence among their low-income clients. While they try to protect themselves from vulnerability to all outside pressures, they are nevertheless dependent at certain junctures on electoral decisions for public mandates and public resources. They are therefore compelled to anticipate and to accommodate to sentiments of electoral groups. The groups which have come to dominate the electoral process are not formed primarily from the poor but from the great middle-class majorities. This majority generally regards with deep unease the emergence of low-income collectivities which might threaten established values and institutional arrangements. If public agencies become implicated in such developments, they will be found culpable. Consequently, the public bureaucracies can be expected to employ whatever means are at hand, whether coercion or persuasion, to ensure the docility of the low-income people involved in their programs. And as new systems of public benefits proliferate, pressures for docility multiply.⁴

The charge in effect is that while the bureaucracies offer help with one hand, with the other they render those in a state of poverty powerless to change their essential condition. The social welfare bureaucracy acts as a guardian of the gate leading to the middle class and there is a kind of mutuality between sponsor and guardian in which each reinforces and perpetuates the other. By virtue of keenly honed sensitivity to the middle class the guardian bureaucracies will not permit an indiscriminate influx of the lower class. Entry to the middle class will be secured on an individual basis after the lower class has agreed to accept, so to speak, client status and to submit to the enabling magic of bureaucratic expertise as the price of admission to greater economic and social opportunities.

⁴Richard A. Cloward and Frances Fox Piven, "Politics, Professionalism and Poverty". Paper prepared for Columbia University School of Social Work Arden House Conference on "The Role of Government in Promoting Social Change", Harriman, New York, November 18-21, 1965 (mimeographed), p.2.

But for argument's sake, what if through this process of selectivity our middle class society is eventually extended to as much as, say, 95 per cent of our population? What if exclusion has been virtually limited to the irreducible core which will not or cannot be rehabilitated? Can we then deny that the welfare bureaucracies have failed to do the job? After all will they not have accomplished what the ideological movements of the past have, namely, enlargement to a very substantial degree of the base of the middle class to include the low income groups of the current era?

This argument might warrant consideration if an ever-expanding labour force could be equated with the dynamics of productivity. But the stark fact is that at the rate automation is moving we face the possibility (unless steps are taken to alter the course of events) of being confronted in the not too distant future with a nobility based on work that will be conceivably as small as the nobility based on land-tenure which once held sway. The work elite produced by the automated age will, by virtue of its vast productive capacities, be in an infinitely better position to feed, clothe, and generally care for society as a whole than was the landed gentry. But like their privileged antecedents the new elite would inevitably fall into possession of the power to render decisions as to the disposition of the plenitude of social and economic benefits. Unless the bureaucratic structures are capable of exercising their roles as far-seeing, corrective influences instead of reinforcers of the status quo, they may well find themselves dealing in the future with a dispossessed segment of the population immensely larger than the current 20 per cent who are powerless to change their condition.

The question of power is, therefore, crucially tied to capacity or lack of it to create change or to ward off undesirable developments which threaten in the future. The remedial and rehabilitative approaches to community development will not come to grips with power which must perforce underlie self-determination at the community level. In bold terms the challenge that faces the sponsors, both governmental and voluntary, of community development in Canada is whether they have the vision and the courage to confer upon their

organizational structures not only the ability to deliver services but the freedom to create capacity (i.e. power) within the poor as a class to change their present unwholesome condition and ward off situations which threaten to reduce the productive segments of our population, thus enlarging the dispossessed element mired in helplessness.

III

But to fling this challenge at bureaucracies is tantamount to tilting at an abstraction; a realistic consideration of the problem must take into account the people active in community development on the Canadian scene.

By and large the individuals working in community organization and community development are either ideologically motivated⁵ or come from the helping professions. This division is, in a sense, arbitrary; many of those functioning on the basis of ideological loyalties may very well be quite skilled in the practice of community work, while those with professional training may by no means be devoid of ideological conviction. Generally speaking, however, the two orientations hold true as distinct motivations for those active in the field. And although these orientations may not easily be separated out as they operate in real life within people, conceptually, at any rate, the ideology and the helping profession are distinguishable. The ideology engages society through a vision of the good life; the basis of the profession is a model of well being. The ideological movement has faith, whereas the profession adopts a hypothesis. The aim of the ideologically endowed group is salvation; the objective of the profession is social health. The ideologist is concerned with the total life mystique; the professional, with a manageable problem entity. The ideological movement seeks ascendancy

⁵For an indication of the extent to which Canada's student youth with ideological commitments have become active in what they term "community organizing" see "A Report on Community Organizing Projects, Summer 1965, prepared for the Company of Young Canadians by the Student Union for Peace Action" (mimeographed).

through the accumulation of power; the profession, through authority in what Parsons called rationality and scientific knowledge.⁶

Undoubtedly the characteristics attributed above to the ideologies would be promptly rejected by our new radicals, many of whom are deeply involved in community projects in various localities throughout Canada. Such attributes, they would argue, are descriptive of movements in the past. The new radicals indeed are suspicious of blueprint philosophies and a priori doctrines. In their view, as one grapples to understand it, the so-called traditional ideologies do not put man at the centre of society's concern; rather, they are Procrustean beds that fit man into preconceived, overriding views, and these impersonal philosophies only contribute to, rather than reduce, mechanized relationships between people. Theirs is the pragmatic approach in which the solution resides in the immediate problem at hand. Such pragmatism as our student youth have seemingly adopted in relation to the various projects in which they are engaged is capable of producing change, but it is small-scale change scattered throughout various localities. As welcome as this contribution is, it nevertheless remains to be seen whether it has the seeds of large-scale changes indispensable to a basic alteration in the condition of the poor. Meanwhile such phrases as "participatory democracy" and "consensus" which figure so prominently in the writings of the new radicals in no way convey how their localism can be transcended to produce power on a scale generated by former ideologies.

Theirs is akin to the limitation which characterized the work of Saul Alinsky, and as Riessman points out:

... the communities he has organized remain essentially isolated from each other.... They may change the local situation, but they have no influence on national issues of unemployment, housing, and the like. Sometimes they appear to function more as sociotherapy than social action.

⁶Talcott Parsons, Essays in Sociological Theory (rev. ed., Glencoe, Ill: The Free Press, 1954), p.37.

They are sociotherapeutic in the sense that the people who participate in them profit from this involvement psychologically and feel more independent, and this all to the good. However, the question must arise. How long can sociotherapy continue if through-going changes in the social structure are not produced?⁷

In the tradition of American pragmatism Alinsky has reduced classical dialectics, which as conceived in Europe have always operated on a grand scale, to a kind of neighbourhood Marxism.

By contrast the professional worker, potentially at any rate, does have the means to become involved in large-scale change primarily because he occupies strategic roles in an extensive process which embraces the local community in need of help as well as high sources of power at regional and national levels. However, much of this capacity is neutralized, as we are beginning to see in some developing countries, by structural tension generated within large organizational systems seeking to effect change. These tensions are characterized by a lack of consistency among workers carrying professional roles. Thus the community level generalist may succumb to frustration at what he perceives as cynical welfare experts acting close to sources of power and policy formulation. The latter may feel equally crushed, on the one hand, by an expedient political power structure whose main concern is tenure of office and, on the other, by the demands of workers active with community groups who have become unswerving in their identification with the localities. Such tensions, if prolonged, may produce a latently rebellious community level worker, who releases discontent and urges local groups on with little or no sense of accountability to his own sponsoring organization. Similarly the worker relating to sources of power may in his helplessness become fatalistic, allowing the issues that well in on him to swirl about him while he settles for a make-do-from-day-to-day approach.

⁷Frank Riessman, "Self-Help Among the Poor: New Styles of Social Action", Trans-Action, Vol. II (Sept./Oct. 1965), p.35.

What needs to be understood within the bureaucratic structure is that professional work in community development is not inherently as free as the community level generalist may want; nor is practice as subservient as the expert in close proximity to power structure may fear. Professional practice within the bureaucratic setting is inevitably a synthesis of the struggle between limitations imposed by structure and the unconfined enabling facilities of the professional calling. Unlike the ideological movement, the helping profession does not engage in power struggles with the sponsor active in various development projects. The helping profession strives for its freedom and autonomy through sustained interpretation. Such interpretation, if effective, can help alter the self-image of power structure from one of simply being the locus of order giving to that of seeing itself as the representative of the client community. When such a perception of "self" has been achieved, power structure is in a position to assume responsibility for accepting and nurturing the role of the professional practitioner.⁸ By interpretation we do not mean merely the proffering of explanations or translations, but rather that aspect by which an artist communicates, through his total performance, his representation of reality. Where true nurture of the professional role has been recognized and accepted by the sponsor, the professional worker is freed to help in the creation of new centres of power. It is this capacity which puts the worker at the core of the democratic process, for the test of democracy lies in its ability to endow emerging groups with the requisite power to effect self-determination. Moreover, is is the sense of involvement in this process which facilitates consistency in professional role behaviour. Latent rebelliousness, fatalism, and cynicism in the practitioner born of desperation are replaced by constructive effort and readiness to face such inherent frustrations in community work as slow growth, lack of leadership, and the like.

⁸The function of power structure as nurturer of the professional role is rarely discussed in the literature. For an interesting reference to this question see J.R. Seeley, et al, Community Chest (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1957), p.329.

That power can be transferred on a rationally planned basis is an assumption which is being seriously questioned in various quarters, including many whose participation in community organization and community development is rooted in an ideological commitment to the betterment of society. Plausible formulation in theory notwithstanding, the intrinsic nature of power is such, they maintain, that it will never be handed over without conflict by those in a position to wield it; nor will power structure ever permit the professional practitioner to transfer power and beget what appears to the power elite as nothing short of subsidized revolt. Like the ideologists of the '30's' the new radicals often see the professional community worker as having, despite his good intentions, cast his lot with the establishment. In their view, it is tantamount to a delusion for the professional practitioner to assume that he can become a real factor in the transfer of social power, especially when he is in effect an employee of that very class which must surrender some of its power to the disadvantaged elements in a state of poverty.

This argument grows out of palpable human experience, and testimony as to its validity goes back to the dawn of social organization. Moreover, the experience of the professional community worker is still much too recent to refute this argument. Nevertheless, certain facts about individual behaviour once held to be fixed truths have undergone marked change in recent times. The inferences frequently drawn from work pioneered with individuals and based on rational approaches to change are in their early stages of extension to the community. Yet, indications coming from various countries engaged in community development with the aid of professionally trained workers, although preliminary, bring with them a measure of optimism that the deeply entrenched tradition of conflict is not necessarily society's preordained path to social change.

In the final analysis the basic idea underlying rational planning for change is more than a hypothesis. It represents a hope, indeed an idealistic vision, that society in moving to shape its destiny can, at least to some extent, effect a reduction in the terrible toll of needless conflicts and struggles which have been taken for granted in the past as an inescapable part of the process of change.

(Note: A paper presented at the 2nd Institute of the National Committee of Canadian Schools of Social Work, Toronto, November 25-28, 1965.)

